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ABSTRACT

This literature review emphasizes teaching from a multicultural perspective with a focus on integrating multiethnic literature into the core curriculum. Multiethnic literature has been defined as literature dealing with peoples of diverse backgrounds within the United States, including African Americans, Asian Americans, Hispanic Americans, and Native Americans. The review proposes how multiethnic literature can be used in the multicultural classroom to affirm one's cultural identity, teach respect for other cultures, and provide social confidence. Unfortunately, culturally conscious literature about people of diverse backgrounds generally lies outside the literary canon, so this literature review establishes the need for a permanent place for multiethnic literature in the formerly almost exclusively European-based children's literary canon. (Contains 50 references. Appendixes contain a chart of 32 works of multiethnic children's literature and guidelines for using multiethnic literature.) (Author/RS)

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# MULTIETHNIC CHILDREN'S LITERATURE: ITS NEED FOR A PERMANENT PLACE IN THE CHILDREN'S LITERARY CANON

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By

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ABSTRACT

MULTIETHNIC LITERATURE: ITS NEED FOR A PERMANENT PLACE IN THE CHILDREN'S LITERARY CANON

Lakesha Marshay Carpenter

The literature review will emphasize teaching from a multicultural perspective with a focus on integrating multiethnic literature into the core curriculum. Multiethnic literature has been defined as literature dealing with peoples of diverse backgrounds within the United States, including African Americans, Asian Americans, Hispanic Americans, and Native Americans. The review will propose how multiethnic literature can be used in the multicultural classroom to affirm one's cultural identity, teach respect for other cultures, and provide social confidence. Unfortunately, culturally conscious literature about people of diverse backgrounds generally lies outside the literary canon, so this literature review will establish the need for a permanent place for multiethnic literature in the formerly almost exclusively European-based children's literary canon.

## Introduction

The United States has become known as the "melting pot" of the world because there are so many people of diverse backgrounds and cultures. In teaching children of diverse backgrounds it is important to know the differences that exist in their primary culture from the mainstream culture in which they live. Culture has been defined as,

> A body of learned behaviors common to a given human society, that acts as a template (it has predictable form and content), that shapes behavior and consciousness within a human society from generation to generation. (Goldenberg & Gallimore, 1995).

Culture has physical aspects (visible culture) and mental and behavioral aspects (invisible culture). The physical aspects of a culture are its buildings, clothing, and its works of art. The mental and behavioral aspects of culture are its beliefs, values, and standards (Au, 1993). The physical aspects of a culture are not usually troublesome because they are visual; we can see teepees that are traditional of some Native American plains tribes, murals that are typical of Hispanic culture, and clothing that is characteristic of African Americans. We cannot see (visualize) why some Asian American students do not look into our eyes when we are speaking directly to them because this is invisible culture, which could cause conflict in the classroom.

The traditional school is not meeting the needs of students of diverse backgrounds and cultures. Non-mainstream students are getting lost in our public school system.

"In 1989, among the population aged 16 to 24, only 67% of Hispanics completed high school or its equivalency, [and] 86% of African Americans versus 88% of Whites" (Garcia, 1994, p.17) completed high school. In this data, the difference between African American and Whites does not look unfavorable but the difference between those who fall one or more years below grade level does. The percentage of 13-year-olds performing one or more years below grade level in 1989 was an average of 28.8% for White students, 44.7% for African Americans and 40.3 % for Hispanic students (Garcia, 1994). This data paints a grim picture of academic achievement for students of color. Clearly, the academic needs of students of color (e.g., African American, Hispanics) have not received adequate support in the current school system.

Multicultural education is one way to meet the needs of students of diverse backgrounds. According to Perry and Fraser (1993) multicultural education can be described as follows:

> Multicultural education is inclusive rather than exclusive. It encompasses many dimensions of human differences. It affirms and validates each child's culture and background. It provides for the growth of positive self-esteem among all children and guarantees that each child will feel successful.
>
> By providing all children equal opportunity to learn, multicultural education gives each child a chance to reach her/his full potential. The ultimate goal of multicultural education is to develop children's ability to function competently within multiple cultures. (p. 48)

Multiethnic literature can be used in the multicultural classroom to affirm one's cultural identity, teach respect for other cultures, and provide social confidence. Multiethnic literature is critical for the multicultural classroom.

Multicultural Classroom

As educators, we can accommodate for cultural differences by first taking into account the cultures that already exist in our classrooms. The schools in which we instruct our students are located in a multicultural society. Enrollment of minority students in public schools will be about 50% by the year 2006 (Garcia, 1994). Therefore, we need to address the diversity that exists among us by showing everyone's heritage is due respect.

Banks (1982) believes that multicultural education incorporates the idea that all students regardless of their gender, social class, ethnicity, or cultural characteristics should have an equal opportunity to learn in school. Advocates for multicultural education believe that the curriculum should be representative of the contributions made by the various ethnic groups in this society. They criticize the emphasis on Western European values, history and literature.

Advocates for multicultural education would also agree that the history of the United States can only be fully and accurately portrayed through collaborative perspectives of different ethnic groups (Banks, 1982).

Multiethnic Literature

Multiethnic literature has been defined as literature dealing with peoples of diverse backgrounds within the United States, including African Americans, Asian Americans, Hispanic Americans and Native Americans. The most appropriate multiethnic literature is that which is culturally conscious. Au (1993) defines culturally conscious literature as that in which "the story is presented from the perspective of that particular group. The characters are not presented as stereotypes but as complex human beings" (p. 176).

Multiethnic literature can also help to support the school's literacy development of students of diverse backgrounds. Au defines literacy as, "The ability and the willingness to use reading and writing to construct meaning from printed text, in ways which meet the requirement of a particular social context" (p. 20). Multiethnic literature presents students with all the cognitive and affective advantages of reading any fine works of literature, such as enjoying a good story, gaining insights into the human condition and acquiring new vocabulary. The difference is that multiethnic literature not only provides literary benefit, but it also provides the student of color affirmation of cultural identity.

Cultural Identity

Cultural identity involves one's sense of belonging to, or connecting with a certain culture or subculture (Au, 1993). This sense of belonging or connectedness can incorporate many factors such as ethnicity, gender, age etc . . . .

Teaching through multiethnic literature is one way students of diverse backgrounds can affirm their own cultural identity. All children at one time or another are in search of finding the answer to the question "Where do I fit in?"

Although there are not many Native American authors of children's literature, the few that exist tell their stories well. In *Eagle Song* (1997), Joseph Bruchac tells the story of how a young Iroquois boy adjusts to living in the mainstream culture. Danny Bigtree grew up on a Mohawk Indian reservation. When Danny was in the fourth grade, his family moved to Brooklyn, New York. The kids in Danny's class teased him about being an Iroquois. He was asked questions like "Hey, Chief, going home to your teepee?" (p. 7). Although, he answered by saying, "I'm not a chief. We're Iroquois and we never lived in teepees. We lived in longhouses a long time ago, and now I live in an apartment building" (p. 8), Danny was still teased. He was in fourth grade for two months and had not made one friend. Danny began to question his sense of belonging because his classmates made fun of the one thing he was proud of, being an Iroquois. He even began to think about cutting his hair to try to fit in. Danny thought,

> If he asked his mother to cut his hair, she might look at him in that way she had. She wouldn't tell him no, though. Even though her eyes might question his decision, he knew she would cut it if he asked. But he knew, too, that even with short hair he'd still be noticed. (p.7)

Danny's father Richard Bigtree told Danny a story about the Great League of Peace, which was formed between five nations of the Iroquois people. This is the story that Danny's father told:

> It was long ago. It was a time when our people had forgotten the original instructions of our Creator. Be good to each other, our Creator told us. Live together in peace. But we had forgotten. Now our people fought with each other . . . Now, among our people there was one man who wanted peace. His name was Aionwahta. He was a Mohawk . . . he lived among the Onondagas, he spoke of peace . . . As Aionwahta spoke to himself the words of peace, he began to understand. One man alone could not bring peace. It had to be done by people working together . . . The Peacemaker and Aionwahta formed the plan for a Great League of Peace. The nations which had been at war would join together. They worked together for five years establishing the Great League. Then they turned together to Onondaga . . . They planted a pine tree. The four roots of the pine stretched to the north and the west, the south and the east . . . That tree stood for their League of Peace.
>
> Its roots were white, like the path of peace, and it was said that anyone could trace those roots back to the pine tree and sit under its branches in peace. On top of the pine tree they put an eagle, to keep watch and see if anyone was going to threaten the peace.

> In its claws that eagle held five arrows, which stood for the five nations of our people. Alone, you can break one arrow easily. But when you tie five arrows together, it is hard to break them. That is the way we would be. United we would be strong. Together we would work for peace. (p. 26-36)

Danny was very proud of his history and he asked his father to tell it to his class when he came to visit during a discussion of Native Americans.

*Eagle Song* (1997) can help to affirm a Native American child's cultural identity because it speaks of the connection with the earth that Native Americans are traditionally taught. This is what all children need -- they need to see themselves in literature. This book could also benefit all children because it teaches peace and respect for other people's culture.

Respect for Other Cultures

Walker-Dalhouse (1992) believes that all students, regardless of their background, learn from multiethnic literature. As these students learn about the diversity and complexity of American society, they develop tolerance and appreciation for the unique qualities of other cultural groups as well as the common experiences shared by many groups. Bunton (1990) conducted research on the benefits of African-American literature on an eleventh grade English class that consisted of African-American and European-American students who were being taught by a European teacher. Paula Reynolds, the teacher, had not previously taught any African-American literature and she was the first in her school to do so.

At first, some resentment did arise from the European students; they did not feel comfortable discussing issues of race and culture. Courtney, a European-American student, said:

> I think that slavery and everything -- it seems like such an old issue. I think there is no sense in talking about the past. I don't like to be in a position where you have to pick from side to side what you are. We should all be just equal Americans not African Americans . . . they're the same as us (Au, 1993, p. 182).

Courtney's response summed up in general how most of the European students in the class felt until they began to read Virginia Hamilton's (1968) *House on Dies Drear*. The day after the students received their copies of the book Bunton (1990 in Au, 1993) states:

> One of the students, a vocal, self-proclaimed 'White male chauvinist superior being' and erstwhile critic of all literature as 'stupid lies', bounced into class and asked [Reynolds] excitedly: 'Who was behind the mirror? Was it Mr. Pluto? Who was Mr. Pluto? How did he get into the house?' Another student exclaimed: 'I've read more of this already than all of that other one.' Before students and teacher could exchange 'good mornings'-- even before roll could be taken --discussion about the book was initiated and sustained by students for the first half-hour of class (p. 183).

The students finished the book before the deadline and everyone's writing assignment received passing grades. Courtney's attitude changed as a result of reading this literature. She seemed to be drawn to the text. She states,

> Oh, I could just see those caves. I can imagine running across that river there and getting to that house. I would have explored every one of those caves and I would have been so glad to be there and to be safe . . . . You know, maybe Black literature should be set aside, special like, so I can see it better for myself (Bunton, 1990 in Au, 1993, p. 184).

Courtney had begun to examine African-American literature for herself. She was no longer concerned with what others thought. Bunton's research (in Au, 1993) demonstrates the benefits of exposing students to culturally conscious African-American literature. The students in this class began to open up with discussing issues surrounding ethnicity and became more appreciative of cultural differences. Not only did *House on Dies Drear* increase African American cultural understanding for European students, but it also provided social confidence for the African American student who now sees his or her own cultural heritage equally represented in the literary discussion.

Unfortunately, African Americans are not the only racial group that has experienced a grave injustice in the literary canon of the United States school system. America in 1942 was not much different to Japanese Americans than Germany was to Jews during this time.

In *The Bracelet* (1993), Yoshiko Uchida tells the story of young Japanese American girl Emi who has to live in a prison camp just because she is Japanese.

> Emi and her family weren't moving because they wanted to. The government was sending them to a prison camp because they were Japanese Americans. And America was at war with Japan. They hadn't done anything wrong. They were being treated like the enemy just because the looked like the enemy... It was crazy Emi thought. They loved America, but America didn't love them back. And it didn't want to trust them. (p. 1)

Uchida based this story on her own account of living in a West Coast internment camp. According to Uchida (1993), "During World War II the United States government imprisoned 120,000 West Coast Japanese Americans, two thirds of whom were American citizens. They had done nothing wrong nor broken any laws, but without trail or hearing they were imprisoned . . . (p. 27). This story shows how prejudice can affect peoples' lives. Unfortunately, the United States government did not see that what they were doing to Japanese Americans paralleled some aspects of what the Nazis were doing to the Jews, denying citizenship rights, taking away property, goods and dignity.

*The Bracelet* is a great story because it tells an almost untold story. Usually, whenever children hear about racial prejudice, they think of African Americans and slavery, but this story is different. This book brings back the awareness that what happened in the past could very well happen in the present. The United States government used war hysteria as an excuse to exhibit racial prejudice.

"In 1982 a commission established by President Jimmy Carter and the United States Congress concluded... that a grave injustice had been done to Japanese Americans, and that the causes of the uprooting were race prejudice, war hysteria, and a failure of political leadership" (Uchida, 1993, p. 27). Of course, admitting that a wrong of this magnitude had taken place cannot undo the past; it can only better our future when the truth is told accurately. All children need to see their history accurately portrayed in literature. Truth can give them a sense of renewed social confidence to know that others know the facts and together all Americans can work toward a better future.

Social Confidence

Multiethnic literature is beneficial to students in many different ways. In dealing with historical facts, students become aware that traditional mainstream accounts have tended to emphasize the achievements of European Americans, men, and the wealthy. The achievements of people of color, women, the working class and the poor are virtually ignored. In *Passage to Freedom: The Sugihara Story* (1997), Ken Mochizuki tells the story of Hiroki Sugihara family's involvement in World War II. Hiroki Sugihara's father, Chiune Sugihara, was a Japanese diplomat in Kuanas, Lithuania in 1940. As the Nazis took over Poland, many Jewish people fled their homes for safety and hundreds of them ended up at the Sugihara's home. The Jews from Poland knew that Chiune was a Japanese diplomat and they wanted him to give them visas so they could flee to Japan before being captured by the Nazi soldiers.

Unfortunately, the Japanese government would not grant Chiune permission to give out hundreds or thousands of visas to these refugees. Chiune was very disturbed about this situation; he did not know what to do. Chiune said, "I have to do something. I may have to disobey my government, but if I don't, I will be disobeying God" (Mochizuki, 1997, p. 13). As the story is told, Chiune signs hundreds--probably a thousand--visas until the Soviets took over Lithuania and ordered him to leave. Chiune and his family were sent to a Soviet internment camp for eighteen months for assisting the refugees. When the Sugihara family was finally able to return to Japan, Chiune was asked to resign from diplomatic service.

Chiune's good deeds were not overlooked. In 1985 he received the "Righteous Among Nations" Award from Yad Vashem in Israel. He was the first and only Asian person to receive this honor. In 1992, six years after Chiune died, a monument was dedicated at his birthplace in Yaotsu, Japan. It is known as the Hill of Humanity.

*Passage to Freedom: The Sugihara Story* gives students a different perspective of history. The story teaches children the importance of caring for all people, including those who are different from them. Chiune was one person who made a tremendous difference in the lives of others and it was not because they were like him. Chiune was a well-educated Japanese man who spoke six languages and had a very promising career as a diplomat, but instead of being selfish and thinking only of himself, he put the lives of others before his own.

In dealing with social confidence it is also necessary to review historical facts that have been somewhat ignored by the mainstream culture. In *Dinner at Aunt Connie's House* (1993), Faith Ringgold brings to life the lives of twelve African American women who have contributed to American society. Ringgold has the gift of storytelling. The women in the story are portraits that come to life and tell their contribution. For example, Fannie Lou Hamer says, "I am Fannie Lou Hamer, born in 1917 in Mississippi. I was a civil rights activist and public speaker. I worked with Martin Luther King for voters' rights in the South. I helped thousands of people register to vote" (p. 6). This is a children's picture book that does not go into much detail but has substantial information. *Dinner at Aunt Connie's House* lets African-American children see their ancestors in a part of American history other than slavery. It teaches children about women they may not hear about otherwise. For instance, "I was a sculptor. My name is Augusta Savage, and I was born in 1892 in Florida. I founded The Savage Studio of Arts and Crafts in Harlem. I taught many artists to paint, draw, and sculpt." (p. 8). This is a part of American history that most students will never read about in a textbook.

*Passage to Freedom: The Sugihara Story* and *Dinner at Aunt Connie's House* are prime examples of how children's literature can contribute to a student's social confidence in the classroom. When a child sees himself or herself portrayed in a positive likeness in literature it not only affirms their cultural identity it gives other

students a social confidence about a culture with which they are not familiar but intimately acquainted.

Literary Canon

The canon or master narrative as it is sometimes called, dates back to medieval Europe when a church body determined certain books of the Bible to be "great books." According to Cornbleth and Waugh (1995), canon has come to mean "a body of established or otherwise authoritative rules, principles, standards, or texts" (p. 41). In medieval Europe, knowledge of certain subjects came to mean mastery of selected texts that belonged to the canon. The canon was suppose to serve the purpose of unifying people, at least symbolically, in that those who were considered to be well educated, would have studied from the "sacred" canon.

Unfortunately, at the high school level, the core literary canon has remained remarkably the same for over eighty years. It is dominated by traditional British and American works, including *Romeo and Juliet* (1595-96), *MacBeth* (1606), *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884), *Julius Caesar* (1599), and *The Scarlet Letter* (1850). In a national survey of book-length works currently being taught in public, parochial, and independent secondary schools, Applebee (1989) reported only two authors of diverse backgrounds, Lorraine Hansberry and Richard Wright, appeared out of fifty or so authors whose works were most frequently studied (p.176). Few texts written by African Americans or other people of color are designated classics in this list, although many exhibit extraordinary literary merit, expand or reinterpret literary

forms, or provide a forum for voices silenced or ignored in mainstream literature. The vast majority of students do not read African American classics such as *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* (1976), Mildred Taylor or *M.C. Higgins, The Great* (1975), Virginia Hamilton because literary canons perpetuated in schools have become a part of selective tradition. Literary canons tend to include a preponderance of books that reflect the experiences, values, perspectives, knowledge, and interpretations of Whites, particularly Anglo Saxons while in many cases, completely ignoring the perspectives of non-mainstream cultures in the United States.

Therefore, educators need to decide whether or not they should maintain the current canon, if it should be broadened to include literary works by people of color, or if it should be abandoned all together. Although, some educators may say that the idea of a literary canon has outlived its usefulness, at this point there is still a need for a broadened literary canon to affirm cultural identity, respect for other cultures, and to increase social confidence for all students. There should be a literary canon that all schools abide by, but not in its present form. The canon has to be broadened to include works written by people of color, and it needs to have some uniformity, so our citizens can share a common base of understanding. Students who graduate from any public school should receive exposure to the same quality literature of a common literary canon that reflects the rich diversity of our American culture.

Teacher Responsibility

As educators, we will be faced with the task of ensuring that all students have a sense of their ethnicity. Knowledge and awareness of cultural differences can give teachers new insights about their students and about literacy instruction. When teachers take the time to get to know their student's backgrounds and special qualities as individuals, they avoid stereotyping and find that generalizations apply in many, but not necessarily in all cases.

Of course, what a student learns has a lot to do with how a teacher teaches and presents the material. Researchers have stated,

> Teachers need to develop ownership over the literature and be able to share it with students in a sincere and enthusiastic manner. When the use of the literature is imposed, like by a district mandate, teachers may be resentful and unprepared and therefore convey to students a negative attitude toward the literature and members of a certain ethnic group. (Banks, 1988, p.181)

Teachers have to be able to look beyond their own cultural beliefs in order to ensure that the students benefit from the literature.

The classroom teacher has a great responsibility in educating his or her students. He or she must be willing to go beyond the minimum requirements to reach his or her students. A 1991 California report, *Embracing Diversity*, goes so far as to say,

> All California teachers should be proficient in four major areas: language development, knowledge of cultures and backgrounds of their students,

> the building and teaching of student centered curriculum that integrates the diverse cultures of the students, and the establishment of a classroom and school climate that actively combats prejudice and builds respect among racial, ethnic and national groups. (52)

If each classroom teacher meet all of these requirements, it would make integrating multiethnic literature into the core curriculum a lot easier. This report sets some great guidelines for schools to move forward into multicultural education.

A Balanced Approach

Although critics of integrating multiethnic literature into the core curriculum would complain about time and preparation, it is not that difficult. The first thing the classroom teacher has to decide is how he/she wants to integrate multiethnic literature into the core curriculum there are several ways this can be accomplished.

Four approaches to teaching multiethnic literature

Au (1993) gives four approaches to teaching using multiethnic literature. First, the *contributions approach*, in this approach the teacher focuses on the heroes, holidays, and other components of a particular culture. Lessons typically take place on special occasions such as Thanksgiving, Black History Month and Cinco de Mayo. The literature is used to introduce children to the contributions of important people or to special customs. One strength to this approach is, it is easy to do. For example, on Thanksgiving the teacher would generally talk about Native Americans, how they helped the Pilgrim settlers build their homes and hunt for food.

During Black History Month most teachers will spend time on Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s contributions to the Civil Rights Movement and Harriet Tubman, who help to free slaves using the Underground Railroad. Teachers may reflect on Cesar Chavez's contributions to the migrant farm workers on Cinco de Mayo. The classroom teacher can present some ethnic literature without interfering or altering the core curriculum. Unfortunately, this approach gives students a shallow understanding of their own cultures and the cultures of others.

Secondly, in the *additive approach*, concepts and content about other ethnic groups are sprinkled into the core curriculum instead of being treated as a legitimate body of literature. This is another easy approach to using multiethnic literature just add something in, a title here and there to say that it has been done. Unfortunately, this is where most multiethnic literature lies today. For example, when a teacher is discussing geometric shapes he or she may read *Grandfather Tang's Story* and that might be the extent of Asian-American literature in the curriculum. Whereas, consider how a systematic approach to including a body of Asian-American literature to the core canon would equalize the value of Asian American cultures as part of our American way of life.

Thirdly, in the *transformation approach*, the goals and structure of the core curriculum are changed to promote the study of concepts, events and issues from perspectives of different ethnic groups. This approach helps students to comprehend that American society was influenced by the participation of diverse cultural groups.

This approach will require teachers to do more research and look beyond the given curriculum. For instance, this is when books like Laurence Yep's *Dragon's Gate* (1993) would be introduced. This story tells about how Asian Americans helped in building the transcontinental railroads in San Francisco.

Finally, the *decision making and social action approach* attempts to help students identify social issues and make sound decisions. In this approach, multiethnic literature can be used to introduce students to essential issues through well-drawn characters, authentic situations and compelling stories. In Sook Nyul Choi's, *Year of the Impossible Goodbyes* (1991), several social issues are brought up, such as slavery, racism and discrimination. This book tells the life of Sookan, a young Korean girl, who lived in Korea during World War II when Korean people were ruled by the Japanese government. During this time, Koreans were treated as slaves and servants to the Japanese people. This book can lead to great classroom discussions dealing with social issues.

Types of multiethnic literature

According to Ramirez and Lee (1999) there are two types of multiethnic literature; multiethnic children's literature and "melting pot" literature. Ramirez and Lee define multiethnic children's literature as having one of these five themes: heritage, battle against racism, and discrimination, everyday experiences, urban civilization, friendship and family relationships growing up.

Whereas, the "melting pot" literature books do not address racial issues, but just emulate the lifestyle of the mainstream culture. For instance, the main characters may have Asian features but there is no explanation as to their background or culture. In these books, the Asian characters may dress just like children in the mainstream culture. Although these books may be criticized for not addressing cultural differences, they depict the lifestyle of many Asian Americans. According to Ramirez and Lee two examples of Asian American literature that fit into this category are Allen Say's *A River Dream* (1988) and *Lost Lake* (1989).

However, Ramirez and Lee have failed to recognize that the literature they criticize as being "melting pot" children's literature is just as valid as what they deem "multiethnic children's literature." Regardless as to whether or not all multiethnic children's books address cultural and racial differences, they can still be a joy to read and legitimize the participation of all cultures in the American melting pot.

Classroom teachers should look for a balanced approach when using multiethnic literature. Multiethnic children's literature should not be used just to illustrate issues such as racism, discrimination, cultural differences, and cultural identity crisis. Multiethnic children's literature should also be used just as great literature. Ezra Jack Keats, *The Snowy Day* (1962) has been criticized because, "it lacks 'cultural specificity'- i.e., nothing except Peter's skin identifies him as an African American" (Russell, 1997, p.33).

*The Snowy Day* is a children's picture book, and yet it is being criticized for not addressing issues of cultural differences. All students can have a good experience with multiethnic literature as long as the literature selected is appropriate.

Guidelines for using Multiethnic Literature

Whenever a new work of literature is being introduced in the classroom, a selection committee, using some guidelines or standards should review it. A selection committee is a group of people (teachers, parents, and community leaders) who come from diverse backgrounds (African American, Asian American, Native American, Hispanic American and European American) and review various works of multiethnic children's literature for classroom use. According to the research conducted, good multiethnic literature, shares some characteristics and these can be used as guidelines for reviewing multiethnic children's literature.

First, the work of literature should be reviewed to see if the *characters are authentic peoples of diverse backgrounds*. For instance, the selection committee should read the text to see if there are any round characters in the story. Round characters are those who have fully developed personalities and experience a range of emotions. These characters are realistic people living in the context of the time period and their surroundings. For example in, Bette Bao Lord's, *In the Year of the Boar and Jackie Robinson* (1984), Bandit was a well developed, round character and her life story was realistic. The story begins when Bandit lived in China and later immigrated to the United States.

When she first moved to Brooklyn, New York and started fifth grade she could not speak or comprehend English very well. When Shirley was reciting the Pledge of Allegiance, she said, "I pledge a lesson to the frog of the United States of America, and to the wee puppet for witches' hands. One Asian, in the vestibule, with little tea and just rice for all" (p. 86). Shirley is a very realistic character. It is likely that some immigrant children could identify with the assimilation to mainstream culture that she experienced.

Secondly, the selection committee should review *the descriptions of the people and their culture in the context of the story*. For instance, while reading *The Gold Cadillac* (1987), by Mildred Taylor, the committee should ask if the life that Wilma portrays of African Americans is accurate during the given time period. Wilma says,

> Mr. LeRoy and Mr. Courtland from down the street were there too and all were admiring the Cadillac as my father stood proudly by, pointing out the various features. 'Brand-new 1950 Coupe de Ville!' I heard one of the men saying. 'Just off the showroom floor!' my father said. 'I just couldn't resist it.' (p. 12)

To the mainstream culture, a Cadillac may not seem very important or significant but in the past, in the African American community Cadillacs have been known to be a symbolism of success. Of course, this is not common knowledge; it is one of those things that the committee members would have to know or consult with an older African American person. The selection committee would also have to ask if the description of the drive to Mississippi was accurate during this time.

Wilma says,

> We left the city of Toledo behind, drove down through the Ohio countryside and across the Ohio River to the bluegrass hills of Kentucky. Soon we began to see signs. Signs that read: WHITE ONLY, COLORED NOT ALLOWED. We saw the signs above water fountains and in restaurant windows. We saw them in front of hotels and on the restroom doors of filling stations. I didn't like the signs. I felt as if I were in a foreign land. Finally, we reached the Mississippi state line and soon after we heard a police siren. A police car came up behind us. My father slowed the Cadillac, then stopped. Two white policeman got out of the car. They eyeballed the Cadillac and told my father to get out. 'Whose car is this, boy?' they asked. I saw anger in my father's eyes. 'It's mine,' he said. 'You're a liar,' said one of the policemen. 'You stole this car.' (p. 1)

Wilma brings to life the segregated South in this detailed description.

Thirdly, the selection committee should see if t*he literature contains illustrations or photographs that are a true reflection of the culture*. For example, in *The Moon Lady* (1992), Gretchen Schields, illustrations are true to Chinese culture. The illustrations depict the traditional dress of Chinese culture, Schield's uses vivid colors and animals that are symbolic in Chinese art like the fish.

Fourthly, the selection committee should see if t*he dialogue and language provides insight into the culture*.

For example, in Gary Soto's *Taking Sides* (1991), the dialogue between Lincoln and Tony provides insight into the sense of loyalty that some Hispanic Americans have toward their friends and neighborhoods. Lincoln says,

> 'It's your buddy, Linc.' 'Linc? My homeboy moved to the good side of town,' Tony Contreas answered sleepily. . . 'Be serious, ese. We're playin' you next Tuesday,' Lincoln said moving the receiver from one hand to the other. . . 'How are the vatos at school?' Lincoln asked. 'OK.' 'Are they mad at me?' 'Por que?' 'You know, movin, away. Like my new school playin' you vatos?' (p. 1-3)

Lincoln was very considered about what his old friends thought and being loyal to them. The selection committee should also consider the characters use of vocabulary, and whether or not it is reflective of their culture. Like in Allen Say's *The Ink-Keeper's Apprentice* (1979); within the first few pages, the term ronin is used. Sei says,

> There was something about Noro Shinpei that reminded me of an old-time ronin. I say old-time because in the old days a ronin was a samurai without a master. . . Today a ronin is someone without a job. (p. 3)

Ronin is a term that reflects something about Japanese culture, fortunately in this text, the author defines the term for the reader but in most cases, this is not true.

Finally, the selection committee should review the work to see if it *presents any unnecessary stereotypes or biases.* Harris (1992) recommends working primarily with books published since 1970, as one way to avoid stereotypes of people of diverse backgrounds.

Another way to avoid stereotypes and biases is to review the author and illustrator of the text. There has been a vast amount of multiethnic literature written by people who do not share the same background as the people they are writing about. For example, Susan Jeffers retold a story based on the words of Chief Seattle in *Brother Eagle, Sister Sky* (1991).

In *Brother Eagle, Sister Sky* Chief Seattle (1991) speaks to the White Man who wants him to sell his land. He asks, "How can you buy the sky? How can you own the rain and the wind?" (p. 4). Through this speech that took place in the mid 1850s Chief Seattle spoke some profound words of wisdom that have come true today. He says,

> Hear my voice and the voice of my ancestors. . . . The destiny of your people is a mystery to us. What will happen when the buffalo are all slaughtered? The wild horses tamed? What will happen when the secret corners of the forest are heavy with the scent of many men? When the view of the ripe hills is blotted by talking wires? Where will the thicket be? Gone. Where will the eagle be? Gone! And what will happen when we say good-bye to the swift pony and the hunt? It will be the end of living, and the beginning of survival. (p. 19-20)

According to Jeffers (1991) this book could help to reaffirm Native American children's cultural identity because it deals with an issue that traditionally children are taught from birth which is to love and respect the earth.

Jeffers says, "To all of the Native American people, every creature and part of the earth was scared; it was their belief that to waste or destroy nature and its wonders is to destroy life itself" (p. 24).

*Brother Eagle, Sister Sky* (1991) has been praised for its environmental message and beautiful imagery of Native American past (Hirschi, 1991,). However, according to Hirschi (1991), the illustrations in the book do not depict the people of Chief Seattle. He says, "Take a look at the cover image. Here we have the typical 'Indian' as if this book would serve as a model for another TV commercial. The older man is wearing a bison horn head ornament like those worn by some Plains Indians. . . Chief Seattle lived approximately 600 miles west of the nearest bison. His people never wore hats like the one sitting atop the head of the cover's chief (p. 31).

Hirschi continues to state his criticism of the book and Jeffers for not conducting the necessary research to display the story accurately. Hirschi admits that some people may think that his reasons for disliking the portrayal of Chief Seattle's people in this book are trivial and that maybe he is being petty. Unfortunately, some people feel the same way about slavery, and the imprisonment of Japanese Americans during World War II. Like Hirschi, more people need to acknowledge and speak out against stories that are not being told accurately. Then maybe when writers decide to speak on a subject they know nothing about, or for which they have no first hand experience, they will do the necessary research to tell the story accurately including the illustrations. Some people may argue that the words were correct even if the illustrations were not.

but *Brother Eagle, Sister Sky* (1991) was marketed as a children's picture book so, of course, the children looked at the pictures. Unfortunately, the story that they were getting from the pictures according to Hirschi was an inaccurate one.

By using the characteristics provided as a minimum guideline in selecting multiethnic literature will help the selection committee avoid using multiethnic literature that may not be culturally conscious. For example, the following list of Native American literature was composed using the characteristics:

| Native American Literature | Characters are authentic peoples of diverse backgrounds | Description of the people and their culture are realistic in the context of the story | Illustrations or photographs are a true reflection of the culture | The dialogue and language provides insight into the culture | The literature does not present any unnecessary stereotypes or biases |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *The Legend of the Bluebonnet* (1983) | • | • | • | • | • |
| *The Boy Who Loved Bears* (1994) | • | • | • | • | • |
| *Dog People: Native Dog Stories* (1995) | • | • | • | • | • |
| *The Legend of the Indian Paintbrush* (1988) | • | • | • | • | • |

(See Appendix A for a full list).

Conclusion

The research suggests that culturally conscious multiethnic literature can be a powerful instrument for conveying and interpreting cultural differences.

Multiethnic literature can be beneficial to all students; it can affirm the cultural identity of students of diverse backgrounds as well as teach mainstream students respect for other cultures. Multiethnic literature can also provide social confidence by elaborating on historical facts that were ignored in the almost exclusive European children's literary canon. Thus, there is a need for culturally conscious multiethnic children's literature permanent place in the children's literary canon. Multiethnic literature can help to broaden the minds of students and cause them to reevaluate their way of thinking. Remember, after reading *House on Dies Drear*(1968), Courtney, a European-American student said,

> Oh, I could just see those caves. I can imagine running across that river there and getting to that house. I would have explored every one of those caves and I would have been so glad to be there and to be safe. . . You know, maybe Black literature should be set aside, special like, so I can see it better for myself. (Bunton, 1990 in Au, 1993, p. 184)

Through multiethnic literature, Courtney developed an interest she previously did not have; this should be what educators' desire for their students to have, an eye opening revelation or experience that will help them to become better than what they were. Multiethnic literature maybe the tool that will empower students by giving them inspiration and confidence.

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# Appendix A

| **Multiethnic Literature** | Characters are authentic peoples of diverse backgrounds | Description of the people and their culture are realistic in the context of the story | Illustrations or photographs are a true reflection of the culture | The dialogue and language provides insight into the culture | The literature does not present any unnecessary stereotypes or biases |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **African American Literature** | | | | | |
| 1. *Peter's Chair* (1967) Ezra Jack Keats | • | • | • | • | • |
| 2. *Mirandy and Brother Wind* (1988) Patricia McKissack | • | • | • | • | • |
| 3. *Listen for the Fig Tree* (1974) Sharon Bell Mathis | • | • | • | • | • |
| 4. *My Friend Jacob* (1980) Lucille Clifton | • | • | • | • | • |
| 5. *Tar Beach* (1988) Faith Ringgold | • | • | • | • | • |
| 6. *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* (1976) Mildred Taylor | • | • | • | • | • |
| 7. *A Piece of Mine* (1992) J. California Cooper | • | • | • | • | • |
| 8. *Mama* (1991) Terry McMillan | • | • | • | • | • |
| **Asian American Literature** | | | | | |
| 9. *Rise and Shine, Mariko-Chan* (1986) Chiyoko Tomioka | • | • | • | • | • |
| 10. *Sachiko Means Happiness* (1990) Kimiko Sakai | • | • | • | • | • |

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|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 11. *The Happy Funeral* (1982) Eve Bunting | • | • | • | • | • |
| 12. *Baseball Saved Us* (1993) Ken Mochizuki | • | • | • | • | • |
| 13. *Crow Boy* (1955) Taro Yashima | • | • | • | • | • |
| 14. *Child of the Owl* (1977) Laurence Yep | • | • | • | • | • |
| 15. *Desert Exile* (1982) Yoshiko Uchida | • | • | • | • | • |
| 16. *The Joy Luck Club* (1989) Amy Tan | • | • | • | • | • |
| **Hispanic American Literature** | | | | | |
| 17. *The Tortilla Factory* (1995) Gary Paulsen | • | • | • | • | • |
| 18. *Abuela's Weave* (1993) Omar Castaneda | • | • | • | • | • |
| 19. *Nana Upstairs, Nana Downstairs* (1973) Tomie DePaola | • | • | • | • | • |
| 20. *Maria Molina and the Days of the Dead* (1994) Kathleen Krull | • | • | • | • | • |
| 21. *A Birthday Basket for Tia* (1992) Cecily Long | • | • | • | • | • |
| 22. *Felita* (1979) Nicholasa Mohr | • | • | • | • | • |



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|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 23. *Off and Running* (1996) Gary Soto | • | • | • | • | • |
| 24. *House on Mango Street* (1984) Sandra Cisneros | • | • | • | • | • |
| **Native American Literature** | | | | | |
| 25. *Legend of the Bluebonnet* (1983) Tomie dePaola | • | • | • | • | • |
| 26. *The Boy Who Loved Bears* (1994) Lynn Moroney | • | • | • | • | • |
| 27. *Dog People: Native Dog Stories* (1995) Joseph Bruchac | • | • | • | • | • |
| 28. *The Legend of the Indian Paintbrush* (1988) Tomie dePaola | • | • | • | • | • |
| 29. *Dancing Teepees: Poems of American Indian Youth* (1989) Virginia Driving Hawk Sneve | • | • | • | • | • |
| 30. *Big Thunder Magic* (1990) Craig Kee Strete | • | • | • | • | • |
| 31. *Tonweya and the Eagles and Other Lakota Tales* (1985) Rosebud Yellow Robe | • | • | • | • | • |
| 32. *When Grandfather Journeys into Winter* (1979) Craig Kee Strete | • | • | • | • | • |

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## Appendix B

## Guidelines for Using Multiethnic Literature Checklist

| **Multiethnic Literature** | Characters are authentic peoples of diverse backgrounds | Description of the people and their culture are realistic in the context of the story | Illustrations or photographs are a true reflection of the culture | The dialogue and language provides insight into the culture | The literature does not present any unnecessary stereotypes or biases |
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